Most people watching war footage don't understand what they are seeing

From Afghanistan to Gaza, why images of conflict reveal less than we think

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I floated this idea in my paid subscriber chat. Thank you for the positive reception; here is t article you asked for.

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I was on a plane recently watching *Band of Brothers*, and what struck me was the wa the series captured the confusion of war. The noise, exhaustion, rumour, sudden violence, men trying to look calm when they plainly were not. The way orders arriv late, wrong, or not at all. The way courage and fear sit in the same body. The way m joke, because the alternative is admitting what is happening to them.

It reminded me of Afghanistan, not in scale or brutality or historical significance, obviously. The Second World War was an industrial catastrophe beyond anything I saw, but the emotional register was familiar. The chaos, absurdity, tenderness, ange

deadening fatigue and brief moments of competence surrounded by vast uncertaint
That, I recognised.

It also struck me how few people in the modern West have any reference point for what they are seeing when they see images of war. That sounds arrogant, and I do n mean it that way; veterans do not possess some sacred wisdom. Combat experience gives you proximity, not omniscience, and veterans are just as capable of stupidity, ideology, sentimentality and selective memory as anybody else, and sometimes mor so. However, proximity does change something. It gives you a feel for how little is visible from the image. That is the problem with the way the war in Gaza has been consumed by Western audiences. We were all watching fragments: drone clips, helr cameras, apartment blocks collapsing, tanks firing down streets, men running acro open ground, civilians pulled from rubble, a body in a stairwell, a child covered in d a plume of smoke. The image, the suffering and the dead are real, but the image is n the war.

The image is a shard of the war, stripped of sequence, context, intent, alternatives a uncertainty. It can reveal a crime, incompetence, necessity, or nothing more than th fact that modern war is hideous. From the image alone, you cannot know which. Th does not mean people should look away; democracies should be forced to look at wh is done in their name, by their allies, by their enemies and by themselves, but there difference between horror and understanding. One is a moral reaction and the othe a discipline. Most people have the horror, but far fewer have the discipline.

In Afghanistan, what I learned very quickly was that war is both more primitive and more bureaucratic than civilians imagine. There are radios, maps, drones, legal advisers, intelligence packets, rules of engagement, PowerPoint briefings and carefu worded orders. There is also dust, panic, bad visibility, faulty assumptions, tired me frightened men, angry men, civilians where you were told there would be none, enemies where you were told there would be civilians, and commanders making decisions with less information than the public later assumes they had. The Wester imagination still thinks of war as a controlled instrument: a commander sees the battlefield, identifies the threat, chooses the cleanest possible option and executes i with precision. Sometimes that happens, but far more often it does not.

Aftermath of a 500lb missile on a compound, Gereshk valley, 2007

Very often the reality is a section commander trying to work out whether movemen
a compound is a fighter, a farmer, a child, a decoy, a spotter or nothing at all. It is a
platoon pinned down by fire from a location nobody marked on the map. It is a vehi
commander trying to reverse down an alley while people scream on the radio net. It
an aircraft overhead with a partial picture. It is a lawyer asking the right questions
speed war does not permit. It is a commander deciding whether to risk his own me
risk civilians, lose the initiative, call for fire, wait, push, withdraw or do nothing. Ev
option has a cost; the cost is just paid by different people. Civilians often imagine th
choice is between violence and no violence. In reality, the choice is frequently betw
different distributions of violence, risk and failure.

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